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► **To cite this version:**

Sophie Dubuisson-Quellier, Claire Lamine. Consumer involvement in fair trade and local food system: delegation and empowerment regimes. *GeoJournal*, Springer Verlag, 2008, 73 (1), pp.55-65. hal-00972700

HAL Id: hal-00972700

<https://hal-sciencespo.archives-ouvertes.fr/hal-00972700>

Submitted on 3 Apr 2014

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Consumer's involvement in fair trade and local food systems: delegation and empowerment regimes

(Paru in *GeoJournal*, vol. 73, n° 1, 2008, p. 55-65. Version préprint).

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Abstract

Today, various types of fair trade systems propose new forms of relationships between producers and consumers. If several studies provided accurate understandings of the consumers' motivations to buy fair trade products, the kinds of consumers' involvement that are being emphasized in those systems remain partly unknown. In France, controversies about the regulation and the organization of fair trade with producers from Southern countries lead to broader debates about how consumers should get involved in order to express their solidarity to producers, and these debates intend to include local food networks as good examples of fair trade. On their side, local food networks often rely on the idea of fairness of economic exchange to redefine the way consumers may be involved. From these two case studies, two main kinds of consumers' involvement have been distinguished, relying on the type of mechanisms developed so as to enrol consumers in a fair relationship with producers. The first one may be called delegation and is based on market mechanisms. The second one is called empowerment and is based on contractual mechanisms between consumers and producers and on the construction of collective choices. This points out the capacity of these networks to empower consumers in a more political sense.

Consumers' involvement in fair trade and local food systems: delegation and empowerment regimes¹

Introduction

Today, various alternative food supply chain actors claim to address the issue of sustainable development and propose new forms of relationships between producers and consumers, including fair trade and short circuits. Alternative food supply chain or alternative agro-food networks (Goodman, 2003, Whatmore and al., 2003) gather vary different initiatives, from fair trade to box schemes or farmers market. Some of these systems can be described as part of political consumerism (Micheletti and alii, 2003). They rely on the idea that consumption is not only “a purpose of the economy” but is equally a political issue (Princen and alii, 2002). These alternative systems address questions about the redefinition of governance processes and of social relations in the food chains (Watts, Ilbery and Maye, 2005). Whereas some authors consider them as promising in terms of food democracy (Hassanein, 2003), others are more sceptical about their “alternative” nature and point out the risks of depolitisation of the local (Allen and al., 2003, Dupuis and Goodman, 2005, Feagan, 2007).

Among these different alternative food networks, fair trade has been deeply explored through its capacity to challenge conventional organization of exchanges by introducing the idea of social and economic sustainability (Raynolds, 2000; Raynolds 2002). By emphasizing the idea of “trade but not aid”, fair trade is assessed as a system based on the solidarity of consumers from the North towards producers from the South. The notion of fairness or equity is the cornerstone of this direct relationship between producers and consumers.

If several studies provided accurate understandings of the consumers' motivations to buy fair trade products (Lyon, 2006), the nature of consumers' involvement in these fair trade systems remain partly unknown. The aim of this paper is to assess the way fair trade systems intend to involve consumers in specific relationships in order to express their solidarity to producers.

In France, a large debate has been occurring for several years between different fair trade organizations about the definition of legitimate fair trade. If most of the debates seem to be about organizational aspects, such as the way of distributing fair trade products, or the legal status of organizations (NGO or firms), disagreements about the kind of consumer commitments within the system are clearly underlying. Different questions arise here. How should these systems use existing market regulations such as labelling schemes? What kind of organization should they provide to stakeholders? How should they promote political consumer behaviour? In this paper, we focus on one aspect of these debates: the question of the nature of consumer involvement in these kinds of economic and political relationships. Answering this question may contribute to a better understanding of the role of consumers in market regulation but also in political governance. We would particularly like to stress out the different ways consumers may be involved in economic and political processes to change the market rules and introduce new concerns, such as ethics or environmental friendliness. In France, controversies about the regulation and the organization of fair trade with producers

¹ This work was carried out with the financial support of the « ANR- Agence Nationale de la Recherche - The French National Research Agency » under the « Programme Agriculture et Développement Durable », project « ANR-05-PADD-C3D ». <http://www.c3d.cnrs.fr>. The Authors thank the anonymous reviewer of Geojournal and Daniel Niles for their fruitful comments on a former version of this paper.

from Southern countries lead to broader debates over how to introduce fairness in exchanges between consumers and producers from the North. These debates converge with those held in the context of local food networks linking consumers with producers from their regions. This convergence can also be seen in the fact that many fair trade organizations tend to present local food networks as good examples of fair trade.

Using the actor network theory's perspective (Callon, 1986), the paper will assess the way different fair trade organizations try to enrol consumers within what they design as a fair relationship with producers. Two main kind of consumers' involvement have been distinguished, relying on the type of mechanisms that fair trade organizations develop. The first one may be called delegation and is based on market mechanisms (Kjellberg, 2007 ; Cochoy, 2007; Cochoy and Dubuisson-Quellier, 2000), such as trademarks and labels, that allow consumers to make their choice on the market. The second one can be called empowerment and is based on contractual mechanisms between consumers and producers and on the construction of collective choices. The main fair trade organizations on the French market rely on delegation, whereas several new entrants on this market as well as local food networks emphasize the notion of empowerment. Our results may provide assessment for the social sustainability of such systems and for their claim of a new kind of governance based on a political involvement of consumers. Such an understanding may also go beyond the translation perspective of ANT, which focusses on cognitive aspects, to point out the capacity of these networks to empower consumers, in a more political sense.

The first part of the paper analyzes how the controversies which occurred in France about the organization and the regulation of fair trade with producers from southern countries lead to define two kinds of consumer involvement. In the second part, we will describe these two regimes of involvement, i.e., delegation and empowerment. In the third part, we describe local food networks, where similar debates also occur about the involvement of consumers, through the case of French AMAP (Associations pour le Maintien d'une Agriculture Paysanne²), which are an equivalent to the US CSA (Community Supported Agriculture). In the fourth part, we will discuss the notions of governance implied by the two types of consumers' involvement identified in our case studies.³

1. Debates about fair trade relation organization in a context of regulation in France

Today, fair trade is developed worldwide and based on several principles aiming at defining new markets rules for commodities that are produced by producers from the South and consumed by consumers from the North: long term contracts, direct trading routes, democratically-run producer groups, advanced credit, guaranteed minimum prices (Raynolds, 2000). In France, a large range of fair trade products is available. Some of them are only found in specialized boutiques such as World Shops (e.g., Artisans du Monde), but a lot of them may be purchased in supermarkets. They are identified, on shelves, by trademarks and logos, which refer to brands and labelling strategies (Max Havelaar, SolidarMonde, Bioéquitable, Ethiquable, AlterEco, etc.). These signs or labels are related to standards that consumers are supposed to associate with ethics, equality or environmental respect but which they actually know more or less. Underlying this supply of fair trade products, different

² Association to maintain small scale farming.

³ This paper is based on two field studies. The first one is about the attempt of regulation of fair trade activities in France and has been conducted between 2005 and 2006. In-depth interviews of several people (n=35) from main fair trade organizations, from the French Agency of Normalisation in charge of the project and from anti-globalization movements supporting the idea of extension of fair trade to local food networks. The second field study is an ethnographic analysis of French Amaps based on in-depth interviews (n=50), participation to various meetings of the network at regional level between 2002 and 2007 (n=20), and observations (e.g. distribution of the boxes, interactions between farmers and consumers, farm visits).

organizations exist. Two main types of organizations have historically been providing fair trade products in France. The first type, developed during the 1970s, is organized as an integrated supply chain with importers and buying cooperatives which purchase products from producers' organizations and sell them to specialized shops. Artisanat Sel and Aspal and the well-known Artisans du Monde are organized this way. The other main organizational strategy works through a labelling scheme. It is based on the international standard of the Fairtrade Labelling Organization (FLO) which specifies production and purchasing conditions criteria that producers and manufacturers have to respect if they wish to use the trademark logo of the labelling organization. In France, Max Havelaar is the historical operator of this fair trade system, but other operators exist, such as Step, specialized in fair trade carpets. However, these two types of organizations are not fully separated, since specialized shops may sell labelled products. Max Havelaar and Artisans du Monde had a sharp debate during the 1990s on the distribution strategy, when Max Havelaar finally decided, in the late 1990s, that manufacturers using the Max Havelaar logo may distribute their products through supermarkets, while Artisans du Monde refused to deal with these main market operators (Le Velly, 2006). But in France, a third position arose around The Minga network⁴, which gathers thousands of very small companies, contests the domination of historical organizations, and claims a broader definition of fair trade that includes local exchanges.

These debates were particularly intense in 2005 and 2006 during the attempt of the French government to regulate this market activity, echoing the European process to coordinate fair trade operators. The objective of the French government was, in response to some claims coming from major consumer organizations, to provide consumers with better guarantees for fair trade products. The French standardization agency (AFNOR) was given the responsibility of a working group in order to define a national standard for fair trade. The group project failed to write such a standard, because of serious disagreements between its members. Namely, new entrants on the fair trade market criticized the monopolistic position of Max Havelaar, which is the most well-known fair trade operator in France, thanks to strong advertising campaigns and to its choice to allow labelled products to be sold in supermarkets. These new entrants claim that Max Havelaar tries to impose its market standard as the new national standard. While Max Havelaar claims that new entrants, which are not NGOs but rather firms, are not development oriented and may dilute the fair trade spirit in a corporate strategy.

Another important controversy is about the FTO identity. What kind of organization should be recognised as an FTO? Historically in France, FTOs are associations of international solidarity, which receive money from a special fund from the French government dedicated to aid development. The new orientation of the French Government in its attempt to regulate fair trade activities is to open this activity to any kind of operators, including firms⁵. This is considered as a big threat for the current operators since big retailing companies may use their market power to dominate the French fair trade market. However, this is also a good opportunity for small fair trade companies, because the monopoly of traditional fair trade

⁴ The Minga Network gather several thousands of very small companies operating in fair trade, as private actors without belonging to any International Fair Trade Associations, nor receiving public funds or using labelling schemes. Their aim is to prove the economic sustainability of the concept of fair trade by organizing exchanges that do not rely neither on public funds nor on voluntary work, on the contrary to historical organizations in France which are NGOs. The rendered their position public when they decided in 2004 to quit the French Professional Association of Fair Trade (La Plate-Forme pour le Commerce Equitable).

⁵ Different institutional documents provide a broad definition of fair trade activity that does not limit it to solidarity organizations: such as the orientation document produced by the French Standardization Agency, AFNOR, published in January 2006; the Law about Small Firms published in August 2005 that plans ahead the creation of the National Commission for Fair Trade which will officially recognize faire trade standardization organizations.

operators may be challenged. So far, new entrants are less big food manufacturers or retailing companies (even if some of them undertake some steps in this direction and if things might change quickly in the future) than very small business firms that want to defend a political project: they see in fair trade a way to prove that some new trade relationships are at the same time possible and economically viable. Unlike the former FTOs such as Artisans Du Monde, they do not work with volunteers, and their goal is to professionalize business activities in fair trade.

The last important controversy which we identified is about the choices made for fair trade products retailing. As we said earlier, the Max Havelaar Company chose to conclude agreements with big retailing firms, so that they could sell products with the Max Havelaar trademark in supermarkets: different fair trade products made by food manufacturers (such as coffee from the Malongo Company) or imported by FTOs (such as Ethiquable or Alter Eco) are now sold in French supermarkets. On the other side, other FTOs decided to sell their fair trade products only in specialized stores (such as world shops for Artisans Du Monde or specialized organic shops for Andines).

How both sides do defend their arguments? The Max Havelaar Company decided to reach agreements with big retailing companies because it would increase outlets for fair trade products and maximise the demand for this type of products: selling through supermarkets allows increasing the notoriety of fair trade and helping more small producers from the South. According to this company, it is not possible to develop an alternative way for trade without negotiating with the main market actors, which are the retailing companies. On the other side, FTOs who do not decide to conclude agreements with supermarkets want to feature their opposition to big retailing companies' market power and to promote alternative trade relationships. This is true especially of new entrants, such as companies gathered by the Minga Network, which aim at building adhoc short circuits that could minimize the number of intermediaries and at organizing new kinds of relationships between producers and consumers. They propose a territorial conception of trade relationships that could associate producers and consumers through sustainable development objectives: limiting travel time for products, implementing production and consumption practices that limit environmental footprint, developing fairness in trade relationships... For this reason, these FTOs plead for a conception of fair trade that is not limited to trade relationships between the North and the South, but can also involve North-North economic relationships or South-South economic relationships. They consider that if the goal of historical fair trade operators is to do some fair trade, their goal is rather to *render trade fair*, so they also promote the idea of economic relationships between small-scale farmers and consumers in France. They contribute to build alternative local food networks in France, based on fair trade, associating farmers, small shops, consumers and some farmers unions or development organizations⁶⁶. Defending this alternative vision of fair trade is also a challenge for these FTOs in an institutional context where the government wants to regulate fair trade activities by using the market standard, namely the Max Havelaar criteria⁷, as a reference for all actors. Instead of promoting such a system based on labelling schemes and standards, they emphasize local food systems by defining them as local fair trade networks.

⁶⁶ This Union is not the dominant farming union, but the alternative one, Confédération Paysanne, and the development organization network is FN CIVAM.

⁷ By the way, this choice may be understood as economically logic, since Max Havelaar is the most well-known operator in the market for the public, the institutional actors or the economic actors. And, also, because Max Havelaar is part of international organization that developed international standard from FLO (Fair-Trade Labelling Organization) on fair trade

2. *Two regimes of involvement : delegation and empowerment*

Actually, these controversies may be analyzed through a specific perspective that emphasises the different hypotheses made by different fair trade operators (FTO) on what could be consumer involvement. Our argument is that behind these debates, and these alternative political conceptions of fair trade, two different visions of consumer involvement in fair trade networks may be discerned, which rely on different types of mechanisms to design their action. The first one, called delegation, relies mainly on different markets mechanisms such as trademarks or labels available in economic relationships, and allowing routinized purchases. The second one stands as an empowerment process of consumers and supposes the construction of *ad hoc* mechanisms aimed at organizing the participation of consumers within deliberative and collective process of choice.

This proposition is directly driven from several recent works in economic sociology, deeply inspired by the Actor Network Theory (ANT) and the Convention Theory (Boltanski and Thevenot, 2005). In this perspective, the market is assessed as a dense network of mechanisms and operations that allow markets actors to coordinate (Callon, 1998). A lot of these mechanisms and operations have been identified, such as trademarks, labels, prices (Callon at alii, 2003), but also advertising, merchandising, product design (Barrey et alii.,2000) or even retail spaces (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2007). In the market space, these mechanisms produce what we may call “delegation”: consumers rely on the presence of a label or a standard to make their purchase choices, and therefore delegate to the standard organization or the labelling scheme all the operations of selection and control (Dubuisson-Quellier, 2006). This delegation regime had also been identified in another work assessing that organic consumers would choose organic products either by delegating their choice to the organic label or, in some specific cases like in CSA schemes, by getting involved in the construction of the production and marketing system (Lamine, 2003).

The regime of delegation is close to Michele Micheletti’s concept of individualized collective action (Micheletti, 2003; Micheletti, Follesdale and Stolle, 2004). This notion describes new forms of political participation through political consumerism: the shopping baskets and caddies can become a kind of ballot paper. Citizens try to express individual goals with collective and political perspectives, without committing themselves at a collective level. The notion of individualized collective action describes individual involvement which can generate collective effects. This is the hypothesis made by FTOs which sell fair trade products through supermarkets: they allow consumers to express their choice for fair trade products while doing their ordinary grocery shopping. Consumers can identify fair trade products by the Max Havelaar trademark. FTOs try to make consumers responsible by explaining them that their individual choices can aggregate and generate a collective action. Advertising campaigns aim at showing this collective effect, and the decision to make market agreements with big retailing companies is justified by the necessity to reach a wide demand in order to increase outlets for fair trade products, so that fair trade would not be limited to a small market of rich consumers but can generate numerous individual choices.

Obviously individualized collective actions describe only some of the different existing types of consumer involvements in political consumerism. Other FTOs such as the Minga Network want to promote other types of consumer commitments through fair trade. They criticize FTOs based on labelled schemes for at the same time emphasizing the responsibility of consumers in market regulation and providing them with solutions that indeed reduce their responsibility. From their point of view, explaining consumers that they have a major role in changing the market rules by buying fair trade products is giving them too much responsibility as consumers and discouraging them from increasing their participation in

traditional politics. This is even supposed to make them the opposite of responsible consumers, i.e. to make them irresponsible with regards to politics, once they buy these fair trade products. These FTOs want to promote strong consumer commitment in political and economical life through local involvement. They suggest that consumers may get involved in local arena deliberation in order to discuss, for example, the public buying policies of their local authorities, especially regarding school meals, or the availability at a local level of certain types of products (farmers market, organic food, local production food). They work at locally connecting production and consumption actors in networks of empowered actors. In these networks, consumers would no more be only purchasers of products that they choose on the base of the benefit they provide (even if the benefit is connected to some fairness ideal), but would also become citizens who get involved in collective and political choices related to economic rules and environmental consequences.

3 - Local producer-consumer contracts as an example of consumers' empowerment

Systems of long-term subscription to boxes of agricultural products (generally fruits and vegetables, often other food products) appeared in Japan in the 1960s, in North America in the 1980s, and in France in the 1990s. If this kind of partnership belongs to « alternative agro-food networks » (Goodman, 2003) or « agro-localists movements » (Buttel, 1997), it takes many forms, with various degrees of alternativeness and localism. Here one specific form of such schemes is addressed, the French Amaps (for “Associations d’aide au maintien de l’agriculture paysanne”), equivalent of the US CSA system (Carolan, 2006), and which link a group of consumers to a vegetable grower and often several other farmers for other products. The first Amap was initiated in southern France in 2001. In 2007, there are more than 500 Amaps all over France.

The principle of these local contracts is that consumers pay for their boxes in advance (usually 6 months, the equivalent to the whole growing season), which allows for a mutualisation of risks between farmers and consumers. The assortment of the box depends on the crop, the weather, or other hazards. Consumers have generally to register with the organisation created to manage the system and to take charge of some tasks, mainly distribution ones as well as sometimes farm work contribution. We have described in other papers how such schemes address both consumer and producers' uncertainties through the acceptance of acceptable uncertainties (the assortment, for consumers) and the suppression of unacceptable uncertainties (about the origin, the freshness and the process of production, for consumers and about sales, for farmers) (Lamine, 2005).

In order to discuss how these schemes and networks contribute to the debates about consumer involvement, we will address specifically the nature of consumer modes of commitment, and the oscillations between delegation and empowerment in this commitment.

Local partnerships combine an entire delegation of the choice of products in the transaction by each consumer taken individually and a necessary although variable empowerment of all consumers taken collectively in the negotiation with the producer of the conditions of production, before the transaction (Dubuisson-Quellier, Lamine, 2004). Theoretically, the principle is that consumers negotiate collectively the process of production (e.g., the use of chemical products, the choice of crop varieties) with the farmer as well as the system of distribution in which they participate, which allows them to take part in decisions which they are ordinarily excluded from. But often frames already exist and this negotiation does not necessarily need to take place. If the farmer has the organic certification, the conditions of production might not really be discussed; consumers trust the label and do not want to know or inquire much more. Recent debates and conflicts in the Provence Alpes Côte d’Azur and in

the Ile de France (Paris area) network have sharply opposed the organic certification to the foundational principle of empowerment.

When these local contracts were first established (years 2001-2003), the organic certification was not particularly highlighted, at least not by the pioneer operators. The name of these schemes put the accent on family, small-scale agriculture and not on the organic nature of production. The charter of Alliance Provence (the first network created in 2001 in the Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur area, where Amaps originated) talks about « local farms » and « local farmers » and specifies the absence of chemical pesticides and fertilizers but does not mention organic agriculture.

Then, more organic farmers entered the network while in 2004 the consumers took more power in the direction of the network, through the elections in the regional support organisation. This might explain why more importance was progressively given to organic certification. But we might also take into account the expansion of the network that made it more and more necessary to codify the commitments between consumers and farmers. Things work differently when the network goes from 20 Amaps with a maximum of 70 consumers for one producer in 2 different groups (which was the situation in 2003) to 120 Amaps today (in the Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur region), some of these with about 200 consumers per producer in 4 or 5 groups. At national scale, there are at the end of 2007 between 500 and 700 Amaps, which means from 70000 to 140000 consumers, that is around 0.2% of French population. Another reason might be the influence of French organic organisations, which are officially represented in the structures of decision of the regional network. This is not the case in all French areas. Our fieldwork showed that when consumers visited the farms, most did not ask many questions about organic certification, what it covers and implies and what it does not address. If the farmer was certified the question appeared nonsensical to them, and if the farmer was not certified, the question had been debated at the very beginning – usually with only a few consumers. Trust resulted from this past discussion and also on the guarantee that the farmer worked in a way which was compatible with the philosophy of the network, which was assessed through a systematic visit of the farm made by a few farmer members of an “agricultural commission” created in 2004. Most understandably, consumers seemed much more interested in and anxious about the variety and the quantity of products that would be in their boxes and they would be eating. It sometimes happened indeed that a producer could not deliver enough quantity and/or diversity of vegetables in a box. In that case, some individual consumers wanted to get out of the system. This could lead to a negative effect of aggregation, which we can consider as the reverse of the individualized collective action described earlier. In such cases though, the organizers would usually try to identify the farmer's difficulties and then to gather the consumers and to discuss these difficulties and the possibilities of improvement through the involvement of all or some consumers.

In the Paris area, we find the same debate opposing the notion of certification and mutual commitment. A debate was launched about certification (“organic or not organic”) in March 2006, even though all Amaps were organic there, except one, a conventional cereal grower who decided to grow organic lentils and potatoes on a small area of his farm. After a month, about a dozen answers and questions had been posted on the mailing list, often very precise. In those texts, we can identify two main stands: the demand for certification (“as the farmers practically work in accordance with organic rules, why should they not have their certification?”), and the willingness to bypass certification (“a culture of trust which acts as self-control”, “the process is beyond any label”, etc.). As one of the protagonists expressed it: “Does certification bring any added value to the relationship between farmers and consumers?”

When there is no organic certification, it means that consumers need to inquire and learn about the process of production or to discuss why the farmer is not certified and why it might

be better or worse. It also means that they might have to help the farmer in his technical choices as these are not framed by the certification and the farmer is not always helped by specific structures (organic professional consultants)⁸. In some Amaps, the consumers can offer their specific skills (one is an accountant as said before, one an agronomist; another knows the differences between good and bad weeds, etc.). In some cases which we observed, the farmer who has a severe weed problem on some fields, asked the consumers if they would rather accept the use of an herbicide or come on the farm to help getting rid of the weeds, as he could not afford the extra working time necessary for such a task.

We can consider that such degrees of involvement profoundly change the nature of the relationships between farmers and consumers. Thanks to reciprocal processes of learning of producers on consumer uses and practices, and of consumers on production realities and difficulties, and to their reciprocal commitments, there is unquestionably an empowerment of both farmers and consumers in such cases. This is not always to be opposed to certification though, as such empowerment processes can of course occur with certified producers and besides, some of these networks are currently developing a participative certification scheme that could reconcile the two notions.

4. Empowerment of consumers in local food networks as a new form of governance

Our cases provide two ideal-type of consumers' involvement in market exchanges and social life. One is based on the individual choices of consumers who can express their preferences for products that are produced and sold under certain conditions such as fair trade practices or environmental ones. By doing so, they indicate their willingness to encourage through their individual choices some collective choices, at a societal or global level, such as reducing the ecological footprint due to our modes of production and consumption, or allowing small producers to reach better living conditions. Consumers and operators (producers, manufacturers, and retailers) collectively formulate the hypothesis that encouraging behaviour of this kind may, in the long run, have an influence on our production and trade systems policies. As consumers cannot control directly the different operations that fair trade or organic food involve, they rely on labels or trade marks (in France, Max Havelaar's label for fair trade and Agriculture Biologique's label for organic food) that they see on products. This can be called an involvement based on delegation, since consumers delegate the control to other organisations (the Fair Trade Labelling Organization or the Agriculture Secretary). This defines a form of governance which lies in consumer market power as expressed in individual choices and based on the aggregation effect we mentioned earlier. In such a governance process (Kooiman, 2003), consumers are supposed to have an economic power and to be able to take part in collective decisions by orienting their consumption through this kind of specific choice. Non Governmental Organizations also play an important role in several ways. First, they are involved in the delegation system (by participating in labelling schemes and contributing to standard criteria definition). They also orient consumer behaviour by increasing their awareness of the living conditions of small producers from the South or the effects of the ecological footprint of our production and consumption patterns. Thirdly, they have to show to the general public the collective effect of these specific consumption choices, and to show how it is inscribed in a sustainable consumption perspective.

The second kind of consumer involvement we described is no longer based on this delegation principle that some operators would describe indeed as irresponsible consumer behaviour.

⁸ In Provence, the network considers hiring a technical consultant (a former farmer).

Instead, some NGOs as well as many activists involved in local producers-consumers contracts defend a strong empowerment of consumers in the deliberative arena. From this second perspective, the effects of consumer behaviour do not lie in an aggregative perspective but rather in the involvement of consumers in the framing of collective choices. Indeed, in these alternative food networks consumers participate as political actors in decisions that refer to production, retailing, logistic, and consumption choices made about products. This produces a specific kind of governance which is more political than economic as it supposes direct involvements of consumers in collective decisions. For example, in some local food networks, consumers are empowered to put pressure on their local representatives so as to organize local food provisioning for school meals, to maintain a farmers or an organic food market, to preserve green belts around cities. They may also be enrolled in national or international campaigns against GM food or in favour of the conservation of biodiversity (through seed savers networks). These food networks are deeply articulated to different social networks where consumers learn to connect more deeply their different identities (as consumers, as citizens, as parents, as workers...). In this perspective, consumers are not only individual choice makers but are regularly sued for getting involved in collective decision process by exerting their voting or lobbying power. The mechanisms used by these political networks are less market mechanisms than contractual, political, campaigning and lobbying mechanisms.

The role of these networks' organizations is also very important here, especially because they have to collectively invent procedures of this shared governance involving different stakeholders such as producers, retailers, consumers, experts and often elected officials (such as mayors). Most of these collective decision procedures take place at a local level and aim also to "relocate" economic exchange as well as political participation. From this perspective, sustainable consumption is less the result of the aggregation of individual choices than the result of a collective action and of the involvement of consumers in the framing of collective choices.

But these two kinds of consumer involvement cannot be described as two different worlds, even if they both rely on different philosophies that some actors, such as certain NGOs, may present as irreconcilable. In reality, the two type of involvements are ideal types in the weberian sens. Alternative food networks suggest a framework for mixed behaviours of consumers that associate multiple types and degrees of consumer involvement, from the delegation to fair trade or organic food standards that may sometimes be little known by consumers⁹, to a strong involvement of consumers such as in some Amaps or like in the "decrease theory"¹⁰. Between these two very specific positions, most consumers adopt intermediary behaviour, combining delegation and at certain times, participation in collective choices about production and consumption. The observation of this consumer behaviour might lead to consider it a non rational attitude, since consumers may sometimes behave very differently. But this perspective is unfruitful; we would rather highlight the different opportunities consumers are offered, opportunities that lead to a change in their consumption habits and their involvement in political consumerism.

Moreover, we must consider that consumer involvement may change over time, because of individual as well as collective effects. At the individual scale, the adoption of new systems of practices (Amaps, fair trade products) might convince them that they are trustworthy and lead

⁹ We interviewed consumers that expressed their surprise that fair trade orange juice tastes no better than the ordinary orange juice!

¹⁰ The decrease theory is a philosophy that promotes the decrease of consumption, defending the thesis that the only solution for sustainability is neither economic growth nor sustainable development, but the general decrease of production and consumption.

them to try other things. Our analysis of consumer trajectories indicates that there are three categories of consumers: some were involved from the onset (most of them, but not all of them, already belonged to other alternative movements and groups), some never get involved even though they might stay in the system, and some take progressively more responsibility over time. In some of these systems consumers are confronted with other points of view which often leads to changes in the forms of commitment¹¹.

This discussion about these alternative forms of consumers' governance within local food networks drives to the question of what is political in these alternative food systems. Our findings show that the political dimension relies on the design of the collective which negotiates the form, the content and the aim of the food network. In these collectives, consumers have a role to play, but this role is broadly different to the role they play in conventional market relationships which they exert essentially as individual purchase decision markers, since they may have to commit in collective decision about agricultural practices choices or biodiversity or landscape preservation choices.

Conclusion

As described by many scholars, alternative food networks may adopt very various organisational forms; they may also involve different types of actors or intermediaries (Whatmore and Thorne, 1997) or be anchored in different social or political projects (Allen and Sachs, 1991). Describing two different cases of alternative networks, Goodman and Goodman showed that they may be differentiated by the way they connect consumers to other realities (Goodman and Goodman, 2001), nature and biodiversity such as in ecolabelled organics, and livelihood and labour conditions of producers such as in faire trade. We agree with the authors when they state that these different types of connections may also be discussed as different forms of consumerism, understood as the way consumer may be involved in these networks. We chose to analyse this in an actor network theory's perspective (Callon, 1986) by studying the way consumers are enrolled in networks through a mechanism of "translation" that establishes modes of ordering among actors (producers, consumers, manufacturers, importers, retailers) and intermediaries (standards, criteria, advertising, texts, logos, labels, trademarks, codes of conducts).

Indeed we expected to demonstrate in this paper that these types of involvement may result not only from a translation process, but also from an empowerment process, which emphasises less the cognitive than the political dimension of these networks. The two cases that we presented, fair trade networks and Amap networks, present various organisational solutions to empower citizens. In some cases, they expect them to act as individual economic actors, who can change economic rules through their purchase choices. This is not far from what Goodman and Goodman call "green consumerism" and what Micheletti calls "individualized collective action". In other cases, they refer to citizens as political actors, and provide them with political tools so as to make them become real stakeholders in community empowerment processes. For example, these networks (local fair trade networks and Amaps networks) and the organizations that support them are usually involved in trying to convince consumers to take part to local collective decisions such as farmers' markets implementation, local food sourcing for school meals or national and international campaigning. In these

¹¹ Shops of small retailers are specific place where consumers may be progressively be aware by NGOs of the ecological and social footprint of their consumption habits, just because they propose, nearby the supply of products some flyers that may announce conference on these specific subjects. On their side, Amaps organise debates where such subject are addressed.

networks, the different social identities of consumers, as citizens, parents, workers, purchasers are deeply interconnected.

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